MODERN INDONESIAN THEATRE

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Before discussing modern Indonesian theatre it would, perhaps, be interesting to see briefly how literary writing in Bahase Indonesia was born. The birth and development of modern Indonesian literature is also connected with the development of Indonesian nationalism. This does not mean that all the literature produced at this time had political connections but there was certainly a consciousness which led to a reaction against literature in local languages as well as against literature steeped in Western ideas and attitudes.

The beginnings can be seen in the founding of "Budi Utomo", a cultural body organised along Western lines for the advancement and harmonious development of the Javanese by equipping them with the strength to face modern life. It is significant that this organization made use of the Malay language rather than of the Javanese in its promotion and rejuvenation of Javanese culture. In 1911, the first purely political party, "Indische Party" was formed followed by "Sarekat Islam" in 1912. During these years the Western educated and oriented people were very active and began to organize themselves. In this connection several youth movements are important, for example, "Tri Koro Dharmo," the youth branch of "Budi Utomo" founded in 1915, which renamed itself as "Jong Java" after the formation of "Jong Sumatranen Bond" in 1917.

Around 1920, the Dutch began to notice these organizations and started a stifling colonial policy which led to the search for Indonesian oriented goals. The youth, kept outside politics, gave vent to their nationalistic aspirations in literature which was published in "Jong Sumatra", a journal of the organization of the same name.

It is significant that a large part of the poetry written in these magazines was in Malay which had served as a link language in the whole of the multilingual Indonesian archipelago and also as a contact language with foreigners. The development of Malay as a court language in many parts of Indonesia can be traced back to the second half of the 7th C. Various factors, too elaborate to be gone into here, led to the development of Malay till it became an officially accepted language even in the Government and in the People's Council in 1918. By 1938 Malay come to be known as Bahase Indonesia and the Indonesian faction in the Council headed by H. Thamrin declared that it would use only Bahase Indonesia. In spite of these developments it cannot be denied that the Dutch still had a strong hold on the people. The elite had been educated in Dutch and found it the most convenient language of communication. The result was that although many people expressed nationalistic sentiments, they wrote in Dutch.

The first Indonesian Youth Congress was held in 1926 in Jakarta. Its purpose was to unify the various youth organizations which were based on regional or religious considerations. This reflected the growing feeling of unity between the people of Indonesia. A year later, Soekarno founded his P.N.I. (Partai National Indonesia). One of the major subjects discussed at the Youth Congress was the possibility of using Malay as the language of communication among Indonesians. In 1926, "Jong Java," the largest youth organization, declared Malay as the language to be used at its meetings. By 1928, the idea of unity through one national language had matured. All Indonesian youth associations merged into one, "Indonesia Muda." On the 28th of October, 1928, in the Indonesian Youth Congress at Jakarta, a historic resolution was passed, one of the clauses of which was the adoption of one language, Bahasa Indonesia, as the national language. It is true that at that time many people had reservations about whether Bahasa Indonesia was developed enough to be able to become the national language but it cannot be denied that today it has fulfilled the role expected of it.

This does not mean that literature immediately began to flourish in Bahasa Indonesia. Many social and literary factors were against it. Initially people who wrote in Bahasa Indonesia were mainly restricted to Sumatrans who spoke Malay or whose language was a related one like Minangkabau and who had received a Western oriented education which made them aware of what literature was in the modern sense of the term. Second, writers were restricted by and large to those who had undergone teacher's training and, therefore, the number was naturally small. Third, the percentage of literacy at this time was very low and consequently the number of people wanting to read literature was even lower. Finally, the social and political conditions of the time were also not conducive to the production of literature. The colonial government was suspicious of anything that smacked of Indonesian unity. To be fair, the government did encourage the production of reading material by "Balai Pustaka", the publishing house established by the government, but the encouragement of all that the ideal of Bahasa Indonesia implied could hardly be expected from it.

Dramatic Literature

However, a beginning had been made. In the field of dramatic writing, somehow, there was not much activity. At least very few plays were produced or published at this time. Notable among them are Rustam Effendi's *Bebasari*, an allegorical drama, and Sanusi Pané's historical plays. Sanusi Pan wrote two plays in Dutch. *Air Langga* (name of a famous Javanese king of the 11th C) and *Eenzame Garoledav'ucht* (Lonely Flight of the Garuda) both of which were published in the prominent Dutch magazine, "Timboel" in 1928 and 1930 respectively. What is important is that although these plays were written in Dutch, their themes were taken from history and tradition. This interest is also apparent in the first play written in Malay by Mohamad Yamin in 1928 after *Bebasari* on the occasion of the Jakarta Youth Congress. This play, *Ken Angrok Dan Ken Dedas*, staged at the Youth Congress, and many times subsequently, was based on two old Javanese texts, *Nagarakrta game* and *Pararaton*. It deals with a Javanese king of Singasari in the 13th C. who unified the Javanese realm and laid the foundation of the glorious kingdom of Madjapahit but who himself had to die tragically to atone for previous sins. Sanusi Pané wrote two more plays based on the same texts: *Kertadjaja* (1932) and *Sandhyakalaning Madjpahit* (1933). Like Yamin's play, these also dramatize important moments in Javanese history and have the same fatalistic and tragic atmosphere which seems to be very far from the new nationalistic aspirations. In 1940, Sanusi Pané wrote another play, *Manusia Baru* which has far more idealism and awareness of social problems and duties. Set in modern times, it deals with the relations between labour and management.

Around the 1930s the number of people actually interested in literature was very few but a growing need was felt for an independent literary magazine. In 1932, "Pandji Pustaka", a general weekly published by the "Balai Pustaka", started a literary column but this could hardly satisfy the new young authors. In March 1932, Sanusi Pané made the first independent effort by producing an Indonesian counterpart to the Dutch "Timboel" of which he was already the editor. This magazine, however, did not last very long and in July 1933, the first issue of a new magazine appeared, called "Pudjangga Baru" (The New Poet). Its first editors were Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana and Armijn Pané. This magazine, although it was not a purely literary magazine, played a very important role in the development of modern Indonesian literature. Of course, as was to be expected in an era of colonial rule, more importance was given to cultural problems interwoven with social and political ones, than to purely literary problems. From its third year onwards it gave itself the sub-title, *Pembawa semangat baru dalam kesusateraan, seni, kebudaiaan* (Bearer of a new spirit in literature art, culture and general social problems) instead of the earlier *Madjalah bulanan kesusateraan dan bahsa serta seni dan kebudajaan* (Monthly magazine for literature and language, together with art and culture) and later, it went on to declare itself *Pembingbing semangat baru jang dinamis untuk membentuk kebudajaan baru, kebudajaan persatuan Indonesia.* (Conveyor of a new, dynamic spirit for the formation of a new culture, a culture of Indonesian unity). Although the magazine never had more than

150 paying subscribers, it played a vital role in Indonesian literature from 1933-1942.

1942 was an important year in Indonesian history. The destruction of the Dutch colonial empire and its replacement by Japanese occupation destroyed the myth of the invincible white man and brought a new confidence in the Asian heritage. This confidence was unwittingly reinforced by the Japanese war propaganda. Indonesians, for the first time, became conscious of the fact that they in reality inhabited a larger chunk of land and were not just a small Dutch province.

The fundamental nature of change can be seen most clearly in the field of language and literature. Upto 1942 Dutch had remained the dominant language not only in political and administrative work but also culturally and socially. Even the most nationalistic Indonesians, while subscribing to the ideal of Bahasa Indonesia, felt themselves obliged to use Dutch. Moreover, it was a language in which they felt at home. They had been educated in it and had used it for their intellectual, cultural and even political discussion. It was the language in which they wrote and thought. In 1942, this practice came to an abrupt halt with its abolition as the official language. There was nothing else to replace it except Bahasa Indonesia so that when it was declared as the official national language in the constitution in 1945, it was really only a codification of what had been a fact for the last three years.

Theatre Groups

In the period of Japanese occupation there was a growing interest in drama probably, because it was the most suitable form of expression under a rule of strict censorship and also because it offered an escape to the masses from the rigours of daily life. A number of theatrical groups, amateur as well as professional, came into being, the most important one being *Maya*. Some of the important dramatists of this time are Armijn Pané, Sanusi Pané, Usmar Ismail and Abu Hanif. Modern drama started with Armijn Pané's *Lukisan Masa* (1937) and Sanusi Pané's *Manusia Baru* (1940). Most of the plays of this time have a lot of discussion on nationalistic ideals. For example, Abu Hanif, a Moslem intellectual who wrote under the pseudonym of El Hakim, argues vehemently for Islam as a strong uniting factor and pleads in favour of upholding the spiritual heritage of their forefathers in *Taufan diatas Asia*. *Intelek Istimewa* deals with the conversion of a hardened materialist into a spiritualist and *Dewi Reni* depicts the harmony between various professions on earth with Indonesia, of course, representing the earth.

Another playwright, more professional than Abu Hanif, was Usmar Ismail. His plays, collected in *Sedih dan Gembira* (1948) show his strong belief in religious values and nationalist ideals, the two being hardly distinguished by the author. His other published plays are *Api, Lukisan Seniman* and *Tjitra.* Usmar Ismail was then lured away by the glamour of films.

In the post 1945 generation, three men who have been responsible for shaping modern Indonesian theatre are Teguh Karya, W.S. Rendra and Arifan Noor with their respective theatre groups *Teater Popular, Bengkel Teater* and *Teater Kecil* respectively. Their work provides interesting studies in comparison and contrast. While Teguh Karya has not written anything himself, Rendra and Arifen Noor are primarily creative writers. Teguh's strength lies in his excellent organizational ability and there is a lot of truth in his claim that he has created actors capable of acting in modern drama, and an audience receptive to it. At the time of independence there were no actors, no theatre and no audiences. He had to create everything for himself. For this he enlisted the aid of friends and some members of the English Literature department of the Universitas Indonesia. He was also aided by Mrs. Adam Mallick the wife of the former foreign Minister and the present Vice-President. The turning point in his career came when Hotel Indonesia built a stage of their own in 1961 and he was invited to put up a performance on it. He presented Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Mrs. Mallick invited seven hundred people to it. The performance was a success and the people present were invited to become audience-members of it. Thus Teguh Karya can legitimately claim to be a pioneer in bringing modern Indonesian theatre to Indonesia.

Teguh chose well known plays by Western writers to popularise modern drama. Some of the plays he has staged are Ibsen's *Ghosts,* Moliere's *Tartuffe* and *Le Medicine MalgreLui,* Stringberg's *The Father,* Lorca's *Blood Wedding,* Pinter's *The Lover* Büchner's *Woyzek,* Tennessee Williams *Glass Menagerie,* Brecht's *The Good Person of Setzuan* and others. In the staging of these plays, he gradually brought in more and more sophistication in his technique as both his artists and his audience matured.

The development of Teguh's group can be divided into three phases. In the first phase he used period costumes and elaborate stage settings. He realised that visual appeal was a strong attraction for an unsophisticated audience. Moreover,.he felt that the actors would not be able to measure up to a simplified symbolic stage decor and topicalized adaptations of Western plays. In phase two, Teguh introduced another element in his plays — that of music. He also moved towards a less elaborate stage equipment and reliance on conveying the essence of the play through the symbolic use of stage property. In phase three, which is the present phase of his group, he has moved completely to austere stage sets and costumes and the director's point of view dominates the plays. In December 1977, his group for the first time put up a play by a young contemporary writer, Putu Wijaya. Puttu's *Dag Dig Dug* provided a challenge to *Teater Popular* because the play had to stand or fall by its own merits. It had no appeal of the exotic and the audience was not already familiar with the story. Its tremendous success showed that *Teater Popular* had come a long way from Ibsen's *Ghosts* in 1961.

In contrast to Teguh Karya, stand Arifin Noor and W.S. Rendra, creative writers themselves. This is not to say that they have not presented translations of Western plays. Arifin has done several plays of Ionesco and Chekhov. Rendra has presented Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*; Sophocles' trilogy, *Oedipu Rex, Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone* Goethe's *Egmont*, Schiller's *Robbers;* Beckett's *Waiting for Godot;* Brecht's *The Caucasi an Chalk Circle;;* Ionesco's *The Chairs* and others. While one of their aims like Teguh Karya's, was to introduce modern Western drama to the Indonesian audience, some of their adaptations, particularly those of Rendra's are so free that they can almost be considered as original plays.

Arifin Noor and Rendra can also be contrasted with each other. Both focus on poverty in Indonesia, the exploitation of the poor and on the prevelant social injustices but while Arifin only presents the problem, Rendra's plays are plays of social protest. That is the reason why, probably, while Arifin has never had any trouble with the censors, Rendra has been banned from staging his plays in Jakarta and has also often been arrested.

Some of Arifin's realistic plays are *Lampu Neon, Aminah, Sepasang Penganten, Jandela Belakang, Nenek Tercinta, Matahan di Sebuah Jalan Keoil* and the two plays, *Madekur dan Tarkeni* and *Umang-Umang* of the yet incomplete trilogy *Orkes Madun*. Thieves, prostitutes, pick-pockets, beggars, psychologically disturbed only children are the characters that occur in these plays. *Jandela Belankang*, for example, is the story of an only son of rich parents protected from all sights of grief and poverty to the extent that the "Jandela Belakang" or the back window, which opens into a slum area, is barred so that he may not see the misery there. When he grows up, he becomes a journalist and comes into unavoidable and insistent daily contact with social exploitation and misery. He also realises that his father's wealth is founded on corruption. This prompts him to leave his home forever.

In contrast to Arifin's, Rendra's plots are simple with black and white characters and he has often been criticized for his lack of subtlety. Some of his plays are *Tihungan Jalan, Ada Darah di Bulan, Mastodon dan Burung Kondor, Penjuangan Suku Naga* and *Sekda,* To give an example of Rendra's plots, take *Penjuangan Suku Naga*. The virtues of the country are extolled in opposition to the corruption of the town in the imaginary kingdom of Astina. The queen of Astina is callous, selfish, cruel and sells the interests of her country to foreign powers for personal gain. Suku Naga, a poor farmer of the country, dreams of an ideal society based on honesty, hard work, justice and cooperation. Technology in this society is used but only for the good of the people. This simple plot shows that Rendra's grasp of the problems is an intuitive and not an analytical one. His sympathy with his people is obvious in his plays and that is why no matter what the reviewers say about them, he always gets an enthusiastic audience response.

Traditional Forms

Arifin and Rendra have made important technical contributions to Indonesian theatre. Arifin was the first dramatist to use elements of traditional theatre in plays dealing with contemporary problems. In his three surrealistic plays — *Mega Mega, Kapai Kapai* and *Sumur Tanpa Dasar* — Arifin used these elements with great effect. In *Mega Mega* for example, there is a dream sequence in which the four chief characters of the play — a beggar, pick pockets, a prostitute, and a "becak" or a rickshaw driver — act out what they would do with the money which they have won in a lottery. The enactment is done through a masked dance whose kinship with the traditional "Topeng" is obvious. In *Kapai Kapai,* traditional elements from "Wayang Golek" or wooden puppets and "Leong" dance can be seen.

The use of these traditional elements in modern drama is based on Rendra's concept of "mini-Kata" theatre which can be illustrated from his experimental play *Bip Bop.* The idea of "mini-kata" theatre is probably derived from the idea of the Theatre of the Absurd. Words are seen as restricting and limiting to the artist. Dreams, clowning, fantastic devices and elements from traditional dances and mask plays are used to convey the ideas of the writer without the use of words. Moreover, as Arifin points out, the use of traditional elements also succeeds in conveying the rhythm of the life of the common man.

The acceptance of modern drama created by Teguh Karya and the experiments made by Arifin Noor and W.S. Rendra have helped two young "avant garda" Balinese dramatists, Ikranagara and Putu Wijaya with their theatre groups *Teater Saja* and *Teater Mandiri* respectively. Both Ikra and Putu, like Arifin and Rendra, are concerned with social problems like poverty and exploitation but Ikra seems more philosophical of the two.

Ikranagara has written and directed seven plays: *Topeng, Para Narator, Gusti, Agung, Ranggni, Ssst!* and *Priit.* Of these *Para Narator, Agung, Ssst !* and *Priit* are concerned with political problems. *Para Narrator* and *Agung* deal with the hardships of the people from 1945-1965 in the Soekarno era and how they came to a climax in 1965. *Ssst!* is concerned with the strict censorship imposed upon the artists today and the curtailment of the personal freedom of the common man under the present government. In fact, Ikra has been crusading for the freedom of the artist for a long time. When the "Manifest Politic" asserted that every sphere of the individual's life had to be controlled by the government, it was challenged by the "Manifest Budayan" in 1963 by the artists and Ikra is in full agreement with this protest.

In August 1978 when Indonesia was celebrating her revolution day, Ikra went to so far as to declare that the only place where true democracy was to be found in Indonesia was in the "Taman Ismail Marzuki", a cultural centre constructed by the Government where most of the writers put up their plays. Unfortunately even this place does not seem to have remained sacrosanct. A little earlier that year, Rendra was arrested here while reciting his poems. Ikra himself had to make drastic cuts in his latest play *Priit* and eliminate all political overtones from it so that it presented only the sufferings of the people due to a natural disaster, floods.

Of Ikra's plays, the most philosophical is *Rangni.* The title is composed of two words derived from Sanskrit "Rang" and "Agni" — matter and spirit. The play presents the problem of "duality" in life because of these two elements. "Rang" and "Agni" are represented by a Balinese man and woman whose significance broadens out into Everyman and Everywoman, objective and subjective, active and passive.

Technically the most innovative of Ikra's plays is *Gusti.* Like Arifin and Rendra, Ikra also makes a judicious use of elements from traditional dances. For example, he uses masks in "Topeng" and the title inevitably reminds us of the traditional "Topeng", Balinese dance. In *Gusti,* however, Ikra tried something entirely new. The action of the play deals with a civil war. In the second act, the hero, who has become "Shakti" or Power, makes the sun disappear so that it is difficult to find out who is fighting whom. The light then suddenly comes on the stage. We see Ikra sitting there and he throws a question at the audience: "Whose fault is this war?" A lively half-hour discussion followed in the hall. The spectators had got so involved with the play that they spontaneously started talking about the problem.

As innovative as Ikra but a more voluminous writer is Putu Wijaya. His plays fall into three groups: story-dominated plays like *Orang Orang Malam, Bila Malam Bertambah Malam, Dalam Cahaya Bulan* and *Lautan Bernyanyi;* idea dominated plays like *Adoh, Anuh Edan* and *Hitam Putih;* and plays with a combination of story and idea like *Dag Dig Dug, Awas,* and *Ham Pimpah.* Of these the plays in the first group are conventional romances with a well developed story line full of fantastic adventures. Of more interest are the plays in the other two groups. Like the dramatists discussed before, Putu is also concerned with the social problems facing his people and presents them through paradoxical situations in his plays. These two groups of plays differ from each other in so far as in the third there is an element of story which is not present in the second group.

Edan provides a good example of the idea dominated plays. When the play opens, we see two groups of people. In one group people are eating human flesh and in the other they are fighting. In their hands are flags of Indonesia. They do not know why they are fighting. Although Putu Wijaya denies any such significance, the visual image suggests the moral confusion in the 1965 coup. These people at first try to drive out the people eating human flesh but at the end of the play they also take to the same thing. The idea is evoked of man preying upon man.

As we see, *Edan* has hardly any plot. It is the idea that predominates. *Dag Dig Dug,* which belongs to the third category, has an interesting idea woven into an equally interesting story. It depicts an old retired couple who are suddenly told that they have been left a large sum of money by a distant relative. They are excitedly discussing what to do with their newly found fortune when the money arrives. They find it is less than the sum that had been stipulated. Eventually they decide to return this money and to put in the missing sum from their own pocket. They end up, therefore, by losing instead of gaining.

The most original of Putu's ideas, however, is the *Teater Bodoh* or Theatre of Fools propounded by Putu through *Lho* (1975); *Entah* (1976); and *Nol* (1976 . *Teater Bodoh* can be considered as a counterpart of the Theatre of the Absurd. Just as in the Theatre of the Absurd, the dramatist tries to project the absurdity in human life and the meaninglessness of existence through words as well as through visual effects like clowning, dreams and others, in *Teater Bodoh,* Putu also tried to convey one single idea. In *Entah,* for example, two people in the background chanted "mantras" in the background while the others crawled around in a snake-like fashion in a sinister green light. Through it Putu tried to show the all-pervasiveness of evil. This experiment was rejected completely by the people but Putu considers it the most significant part of his entire work.

The clash between the experiments of a dramatist in the theatre and his rejection by his audience brings us to certain vital questions concerning drama. What is audience participation? What does a dramatist expect of his audience? What is the purpose of this experimental drama? Ikra tried to answer some of them when he was interviewed by a well known Indonesian poet, Sutardji Calzoum for a local newspaper *Pikiran Rakyat* in September 1976. Part of this interview was translated and published in the English newspaper, *The Indonesia Times.*

The purpose of experimental drama, Ikra felt, was to make the people aware of certain aspects of life and to do so in the most striking way so that they would react to the problem presented. Ikra therefore, demanded of his audience an active participation in the theatre so that they were totally involved in the play. To achieve this involvement, he emphasized not only the verbal element in the theatre but also the importance of movement and stage sets. By this involvement he did not mean that they should praise his plays. An active response from them is independent of praise or blame. What was important was that they should react to what was being presented. Ikra accepts that a particular play could evoke edifferent reactions in different people because experimental theatre demanded a subjective response. The role of the critic was only that of a reporter of the feelings of the audience. Of course, he must also educate them on how to respond to such at heatre and this, he felt, was not being done in Indonesia.

In his interview Ikra has by and large echoed the sentiments of the other post-independence dramatists. At the time of independence, they found a big lacuna in the field of drama and have all contributed in their own ways to its development. Translations and adaptations have been useful in training actors and writers. They have also created a taste for modern drama among the people. The various experiments in theatre have sown the seeds for further development ensuring that it will remain living and vital.

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